



iMexican Hot ...or Not

Cooking with Tequila: Mexico's National Drink Moves into the Kitchen Part 1

Karen Hursh Graber

[Her Bio](#)

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Part 2

Tequila: the name alone conjures up a variety of images associated with the Mexican cultural landscape. From its beginnings in the blue agave fields of Jalisco, to its consumption in humble *cantinas* and trendy restaurants, tequila is the quintessentially Mexican drink.

The incredible growth industry which has spawned over three hundred new labels in the last two years alone, along with as many new drink recipes as there are tequila bars, has given rise to the use of tequila in the kitchen, too. Tequila-flavored dishes can be found in places as far apart as Las Vegas' MGM Grand and the village of Tequila, Mexico, where it all began.

From Local Ritual to International Export

The importance of tequila dates back to the pre-Hispanic Tiquila tribe of Amatitlan, in western Mexico, who boiled and fermented the *agave* plant in order to obtain the ritual potion used by priests and healers. Local legend holds that one day, many centuries ago, lightning struck an *agave*, causing it to burn, during which time a passing native noticed liquid flowing out of the plant base, an occurrence which led to its eventual use by the indigenous people.

Whether or not this actually happened, it is known that when the Spaniards arrived in the area in April of 1530, Fray Francisco

Ximenez noted the importance of *tepemexcall* in religious practices. Jeronimo Hernandez, a Spanish doctor who wrote during the early colonial period, observed the use of the liquid as a rub for curing rheumatism.

The fermentation process used before the arrival of the Spaniards resulted in a drink somewhat similar to beer or *pulque*. It was only the introduction of the distillation process, which had been brought to Spain by the Moors, which produced the liquor now known as tequila.

As early as 1600, Don Pedro Sanchez de Tagle, Marquis of Altamirana, began the formal cultivation and distillation of *agave*, and in 1758, Jose Cuervo, a Spanish businessman, was granted full cultivating rights on the territory of Villoslada, Jalisco. In 1873, Cenobio Sauza acquired the distillery he later called La Perseverancia, which today is the Tequila Museum, offering tours and tastings similar to those given by wineries. That same year, Sauza exported eight barrels of tequila to the United States. The growth of the Mexican railways, along with more efficient agricultural production, marked a change in the tequila industry, from a rural endeavor to an international export product.

Transforming the Blue Agave

Tequila, like its cousin, mezcal, is made from the agave plant. Contrary to popular belief, the agave is not a member of the cactus family, but rather comprises its own distinct botanical family, agavaceae, related to the lily. In order for a liquor to be labeled "tequila", it must be made from at least 51% blue agave, also known as Agave Weber Azul, bearing the name of a Dr. Weber, who isolated and identified the plant in 1902, and named it for himself.

If the beverage distilled from the agave has less than 51% fermented sugars obtained from blue agave, it cannot be called tequila. The Mexican government regulates this appellation in much the same way that the French authorities do with cognac. Only designated areas in the country, mainly in Jalisco and Nayarit, produce legitimate tequila. Anything produced outside the tequila regions is labeled mezcal.

The Agave Weber Azul, which flourishes in the red clay soil of arid

western Jalisco, takes eight to twelve years to mature. During this time, the plants are in almost continuous bloom, with flowers called *quiotes*. After this period, they are pinched back; this removal of the seeds produces more sap, which will give the tequila its underlying sweet taste.

The plants are now ready for the process known as the *jima*, which is the removal of the *pencas* - soft, inner leaves - from the ground without disturbing the rest of the plant. The *jimadores*, responsible for this procedure, work by hand and acquire their skill only through years of experience.

Next the *pencas* are placed in large steaming vats in order to extract the sap. This is then allowed to ferment, and then double-distilled in pot stills (unlike mezcal, which is distilled only once.) The resulting liquor may be aged in either used bourbon barrels or new French oak barrels.

Ordinary white tequila is not regulated as to the amount of time it must be aged, but in order to be called "silver" it must rest in wax-lined oak barrels for at least two months. "Gold" refers to tequila to which a coloring agent, most often caramel, has been added. *Reposado* means that the tequila has aged between two months and one year, and *añejo* means that the tequila has rested for over a year, by which time it has acquired an amber color as a result of aging, and not from coloring agents.

A Day in Margaritaville

Surrounded by rolling red hills covered in bright blue, spikey agave plants, the town of Tequila is, at first glance, just another dusty pueblo. However, we have not come here for the scenery, but for the tequila. With over 100 million liters manufactured here annually, we are bound to find several favorites. As we exit Highway 5 about 55 kilometers northwest of Guadalajara, roadside signs in the shape of giant tequila bottles welcome the visitor to town. As we approach the center, the streets are lined with stands selling leather crafts, miniature wooden tequila barrels, and a seemingly endless supply of the liquor itself.

The prospective customer may taste a variety of brands, but is not pressured to buy. The attitude seems to be "we have plenty of this

stuff and it's all good." Advice may be given when solicited, but the general rule is to let your tastebuds be your guide. After sampling a few different kinds, my husband and I each have our own favorite, so naturally we buy both. We haven't driven all this way for nothing, and besides, it's time to stop tasting and go on to the Tequila Museum before *comida* time.

The museum is housed in the oldest existing distillery in town, La Perseverancia, the 19th-century Sauza building. Appointments are not necessary, and the gatekeeper leads free tours which are informative and interesting. Stories of the Sauza family defending their business against raids by *banditos* are passed right along with explanations of the various stages in the manufacture of Mexico's most famous beverage.

For those who'd like to learn more about the source itself, Sauza also has an experimental agave farm, Rancho El Indio, on the edge of town. It, too, is open to the public free of charge.

Aficionados of unusual architecture might enjoy a stroll through the gardens of the Sauza villa, built in the early 19th-century, with a series of quarry-stone fountains carved in the shapes of vegetables which match the bas-relief vegetables in the building's main arch.

¡A La Cocina!

With heads full of tequila lore and sadly empty stomachs, the next stop is a good *comida*. There are several restaurants from which to choose, nearly all featuring the regional specialties, including *pozole*, a hominy-based meat stew, and *birria*, a meat dish most frequently prepared with either lamb or goat marinated and steam-cooked in a red sauce. However, we have been fortunate enough to get a recommendation from one of the tequila vendors, and find ourselves in at El Callejon, a restaurant which features a selection of grilled meat dishes, subtly accented with tequila.

We start with a before-dinner drink of - what else?- tequila, served in small pony glasses called *caballitos*, served with the traditional chaser called *sangrita*, an orange and tomato juice combination seasoned with chile and spices. This is followed by Fajitas de Res al Tequila, a scrumptious dish of sauteed beef strips, onion and green peppers, with just enough tequila splashed on at the end for a

delicious twist.

After our meal at El Callejon, I was inspired to seek out other recipes using tequila, and found several from different parts of Mexico, including a delicious fish dish from Acapulco, among others. In fact, I found so many, from salads to main dishes to desserts, that more will follow next month, including some refreshing spring dessert recipes. So, whether your preference is for gold or silver, añejo or white, you'll find something to suit your taste in tequila.

¡Provecho!

Aderezo de Sangrita para Ensaladas: Sangrita Salad Dressing

Sopa de Aguacate con Tequila: Avocado Soup with Tequila

Fajitas de Res al Tequila: Beef Fajitas with Tequila

Filetes de Pescado Estilo Acapulco: Acapulco-Style Fish Filets

Pollo al Tequila con Fettuccine: Chicken Tequila Fettuccine

Part 2

(To the rest of the Kitchen!)

Karen Hursh Graber - [E-mail](#)

**Maybe it's time to get to
know the purple pill called**



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T /9/1

3/9/1 (Item 1 from file: 50)

DIALOG(R)File 50:CAB Abstracts

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03272577 CAB Accession Number: 960309543

The distribution, uses and some characteristics of the agaves of Oaxaca (Mexico).

Original Title: La distribucion, usos y algunas características químicas de los agaves de Oaxaca (Mexico).

Martinez Antonio, A.; Martinez Cruz, M.; Palma Cruz, F. de J.; Cordoba Alva, F.

Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico.

Interiencia vol. 20 (1): p.14-19

Publication Year: 1995

ISSN: 0378-1844

1 map --

Language: Spanish Summary Language: english

Document Type: Journal article

Information on the distribution of 20 Agave species and subspecies in the state of Oaxaca is tabulated and illustrated. The plants are used to produce an alcoholic distillation (mezcal) and for fibre production. The protein and carbohydrate contents of the leaves of the 20 species studied are tabulated. Saline water extracts of the leaves of all species studied exhibited agglutination of human and/or rabbit erythrocytes. 25 ref.

DESCRIPTORS: haemagglutinins; haemagglutination; phytohaemagglutinins; medicinal plants; medicinal properties; geographical distribution; utilization; proteins; carbohydrates; composition; leaves; fibre plants

ORGANISM DESCRIPTORS: Agavaceae; Agave

GEOGRAPHIC NAMES: Mexico

BROADER TERMS: Liliales; monocotyledons; angiosperms; Spermatophyta; plants; Agavaceae; Developing Countries; Latin America; North America; America; Threshold Countries

CABICODES: Plant Composition (FF040); Biological Resources (Plant) (PP720); Human Toxicology, Poisoning & Pharmacology (VV800)

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3/9/5 (Item 5 from file: 492)

DIALOG(R) File 492:Arizona Repub/Phoenix Gaz
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**HOHOKAM FARMED AGAVE, EXPERTS FIND ANCIENT INDIANS CULTIVATED 1,200 ACRES
NEAR MARANA FOR MANY USES**

PHOENIX GAZETTE (PG) - FRIDAY August 19, 1988

By: Edward Stiles , The Associated Press

Edition: Final Section: Metro Page: B7

Word Count: 662

TEXT:

TUCSON - Archaeologists often have described this area's prehistoric residents as totally at the mercy of the climate, unable to move away from the rivers or sites of permanent water.

But new evidence suggests these people, called the Hohokam, cultivated large tracts on the dry bajadas, or the land at the foot of the mountains, where now only a few cattle graze.

"We certainly can appreciate their ingenuity and engineering ability more than we did in the past," said Suzanne Fish of the Arizona State Museum. She is one of four archaeologists who recently confirmed the Hohokam, who lived here until about 1300 A.D., farmed large tracts of agave.

The Hohokam were irrigation-using farmers who flourished in central and southern Arizona for several centuries and then mysteriously disappeared just before the arrival of the conquistadores.

It's not that archaeologists didn't know that agave was important to native Americans in the Southwest. The Apache and others were heavily dependent on it. The Hohokam used it for food, fiber to weave into mats and baskets, spines to be used as sewing needles and construction materials for wall frames and roofing shingles.

But what's new is the idea of cultivation -- as opposed to foraging for wild plants -- and the extent of that cultivation, said Paul Fish, curator of archaeology at the Arizona State Museum. Paul and Suzanne Fish and archaeologists Charles Miksicek and John Madsen have found that agave farming was a major industry here between 1100 and 1300.

The archaeologists have surveyed about a 60-square-mile area near suburban Marana and found that the major political and religious site for the community was not along the river, as might have been expected.

Instead, this site got its water from a canal several miles long that probably was excavated with stone and wooden tools.

Paul Fish said the Hohokam put approximately 1,200 acres (about two square miles) under agave cultivation at Marana and farmed a slightly smaller area near Tumamoc Hill. Both sites used terraces and rock piles extensively.

Agaves grow better in rock piles because the rocks trap moisture and mulch and provide protection against rodents that tunnel in to eat the young plants.

The team also has uncovered several roasting pits where agave hearts were baked for 24 to 48 hours, yielding a food that tastes something like a fibrous sweet potato, he said. Some of these pits are up to 115 feet in diameter.

The impressive scale of the large bajada rock-pile fields is illustrated by the 42,000 rock piles and 393,700 feet of terraces and dams found.

The archaeologists estimate that an initial investment of 50 man-years was needed to construct these fields and that 102,000 plants were under cultivation at one time. About 10,200 agaves would have been harvested each year, supplying the annual calorie requirements of 155 people and the protein requirements of 110. Such a food source -- not to mention all the craft material available as byproducts -- would have added significantly to the Hohokam diet and economy.

Suzanne Fish said the team had suspected that agave was cultivated here. But the real clincher was finding artifacts in the fields that were used for harvesting agave, she said. These are broad, flat volcanic stone tools sharpened by chipping and grinding. Called agave or mescal knives, they were used to cut the leaves from the agave hearts in preparation for roasting.

Since agave grows well in rocky soil, it could be grown in marginal areas, leaving arable land for other crops such as corn, he said. Additionally, it may have had special value in that it would survive in the harshest conditions, after other crops had failed.

"Agave was one of the more important crops cultivated," Paul Fish said. "There is a growing list of plants that the Hohokam cultivated, which is really very impressive. In fact, some ethnobotanists suggest that prehistorically, this area had the greatest diversity of cultivated plants of any area north of central Mexico."

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DESCRIPTORS: NATIVE AMERICAN; HISTORY; ARIZONA

3/9/9 (Item 1 from file: 640)
DIALOG(R)File 640:San Francisco Chronicle
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A SPIRITED SAMPLING OF MEXICO'S AUTHENTIC VILLAGE MEZCALS
San Francisco Chronicle (SF) - WEDNESDAY, March 4, 1998
By: Gerald D. Boyd
Edition: FINAL Section: Food Page: 4/ZZ1
Word Count: 789

MEMO:
WINE POTPOURRI
Gerald D. Boyd is a Chronicle staff writer.

TEXT:
Americans have always had a fondness for the spirits of Mexico. Over the past few years, the attraction has multiplied with the introduction of anejo, or aged tequila. Among the cognoscenti, an anejo tequila is on a par with the best brandy.

Now, tequila has competition. Taking the lead from wineries that produce single-vineyard wines, implying better quality or at least unique flavors, Del Maguey, a new company out of Santa Monica, is marketing four Del Maguey single-village mezcals, with more to come.

Mezcal, which has no relationship to the hallucinogenic mescal or peyote, is made from an agave plant, commonly called maguey. Tequila is made from Tequilana weber, more commonly known as blue agave.

Once enjoyed as a regional drink in Mexico, mezcal is made in many

parts of the country, with some of the best coming from the villages around Oaxaca. Whereas tequila comes from the general area around the town of Tequila, near Guadalajara, mezcal is a product of small village distilleries. The unique soils and microclimates of each village impart distinct flavors into each mezcal.

Another unique feature of mezcal is the smokiness of the aromas and flavors. A deep pit is dug in the ground, then lined with stones on which is built a roaring fire. Once the stones are hot, the embers are removed and the pit is filled with pinas, the heart of the maguey. A layer of dirt is spread over the pinas and they are left to roast for three days. Once an agave is shorn of its long, pointy leaves, the heart looks like a gigantic pineapple, thus pina.

The roasted pinas are then mashed, mixed with a little water and fermented for up to 30 days. Del Maguey mezcals are distilled twice in copper or clay stills.

The present Del Maguey line of single-village mezcals include: Del Maguey Mezcal Santo Domingo Albarradas, which has a smoky nose and taste, over a hint of ripe pear. It is dry, with good texture and a long finish.

Del Maguey Mezcal San Luis Del Rio is more spicy, with citrus and vanilla accents. The smoky-creamy flavors are very distinctive and lasting.

Del Maguey Mezcal Minero (Santa Catarina Minas) has a sweet floral nose, with vanilla and smoky undertones. The honied flavors are rich and persistent.

De Maguey Mezcal Chichicapa is the most complex; a light vanilla cream nose leads to smoky flavors, with citrus and vanilla notes, finishing with a touch of sweetness.

Each bottle of Del Maguey single-village mezcal comes in a hand-woven palm fiber basket and carries a colorful label designed by artist Ken Price. Retail price varies from \$55 to \$60 a bottle and can be found at restaurants and retail stores throughout the Bay Area.

WINE PHOTO CONTEST

Cakebread Cellars in the Napa Valley is calling for entries for the Sixth Annual At Home or Away With Cakebread Cellars photography contest for amateurs. Entrants should submit one or more photos featuring themselves, family or friends drinking a bottle of Cakebread wine or displaying an item of Cakebread clothing such as a polo shirt or baseball cap.

The winner will receive a weekend stay at Cakebread's River Ranch guesthouse, plus lunch for four with members of the Cakebread family. The winning photo will also be framed and displayed at the winery's open house and placed on its tasting room ``wall of fame.''

To enter the contest, send a 4-by-6-inch photo, along with an original negative, your name, address, phone number and a brief description of the photo to: Photo Contest, Cakebread Cellars, P.O. Box 216, Rutherford, CA 94573. Deadline is October 15 with winners to be announced November 15. For further information, call (707) 963-5221.

GEN-X (HEART) RIESLING

Chardonnay lovers, hold on to your glass! According to a recent survey conducted by Wine Brats and the German Wine Information Bureau, more young wine drinkers prefer the taste of Riesling over Chardonnay or the standard white wine by-the-glass. Wine Brats is a national organization

whose mission it is to present wine to its peers, often identified as Generation-X, in an accessible and unpretentious manner.

The ``Riesling Challenge'' survey polled 200 wine consumers between the ages of 21 and 36 at restaurant/ bars in Madison, Wis., Boca Raton, Fla. and Denver. The participants sampled three different white wines, one of which was a Riesling, then answered a series of questions. Riesling scored the highest, followed by Chardonnay, with ``Other White Wines'' close behind.

For more information on the ``Riesling Challenge,'' call Joel Quigley at Wine Brats, (707) 545-4699 or the Web site at www.winebrats.org.

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DESCRIPTORS: MEXICO; LIQUOR; FOREIGN; FOOD; WINE; DEL MAGUEY
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6/9/71 (Item 2 from file: 740)

DIALOG(R) File 740: (Memphis) Comm. Appeal

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TEQUILA ON RISE MEXICAN SPIRIT'S FANCIERS DEMAND MORE AND BETTER

Commercial Appeal (Memphis) (CA) - WEDNESDAY, September 24, 1997

By: Fredric Koepfel The Commercial Appeal

Edition: Final Section: Appeal Page: C1

Word Count: 1,331

TEXT:

This will be easy, I thought. Tequila. Mexico. Made from, uh, some kind of cactus. Colorless or faintly gold. Salt on the hand, lime juice on the tongue, knock it back, shake yourself all over. Margaritas. Tequila Sunrise.

A cinch.

But then I looked on liquor store shelves, started doing some reading, talking to a few people. It's more complicated than I thought. There are kinds of tequila, levels of tequila. The stuff can be expensive. I went to a liquor store and bought a bottle of tequila that cost \$75.

In other words, you can escape from Margaritaville, you wild and crazy Baby Boomers. You put single-malt scotch on the map of flashy gotta-have consumer products, followed by single-barrel bourbons and handcrafted beers from boutique breweries. Now you're willing to pay top dollar for a bottle of tequila, and they don't even put worms in the bottles anymore.

Between 1991 and 1996, according to the trade source, the Southern Beverage Journal, tequila sales climbed from 4 million to about 5.4 million nine-liter cases, contributing some \$732 million in profit to the tequila industry. More important than that 3.6 percent growth rate is the incredible turn to premier and ultra-premium brands, which accounted for about \$533 million of that total figure.

How many thirsty folks drop in to Margaritaville in our area?

Look at it this way. Salsa, a Mexican restaurant at the busy Poplar and Ridgeway intersection, sells 40 to 50 gallons of margaritas a week; that's about 800 drinks. I thought that was more than enough tequila down our collective hatches until I talked to Theo Stemmerik, a manager at Cozymel's, who said that restaurant farther out on Poplar sells 2,500 to 3,000 margaritas weekly. These figures don't include other tequila drinks and single shots, and when you consider how many Mexican restaurants there are in the region and bars not in Mexican restaurants pouring tequila, that adds up to lots of dead agave plants.

Let's deal with some definitions misconceptions.

First, the blue agave plant, from which tequila is made, is not a cactus but a succulent. It's a genus - Agavaceae - of the Liliales flowering plant order; a sort of lily, in other words.

Second, the Aztecs were not drinking tequila when Cortes showed up to loot and pillage their civilization. They were drinking pulque, a milky-colored beer fermented from the agave plant. The Spaniards, as well as bringing death and destruction, brought distillation to the New World.

Third, mezcal is the generic term for all spirits made from blue agave. Technically, however, the distilled beverage mezcal is produced from the maguey plant, not the blue agave. And mezcal, a roughhouse sort of

libation, is made not in Jalisco, from whence comes tequila, but in Oaxaca. Tequila is named for the town of its origin, but the beverage can be made in several states contiguous with Jalisco.

Finally, nobody ever put worms in tequila anyway: ha-ha. Worms were put into bottles of mezcal to ensure that the alcohol content was high enough to pickle the little creature. Now the mezcal industry is regulated well enough (we are told) that the worm is no longer used for quality control.

Human beings will go to extraordinary trouble to achieve intoxication. Tequila, for example, is made from the pineapple-shaped heart, or pina, of the blue agave plant. The plant takes eight to 12 years to mature and can be harvested one time, not exactly an economical proposition; harvesting goes on year-round. The pina can weigh 125 pounds or more, making for a labor-intensive exercise. The sap that oozes from the pina is called aquameil, ``honey-water.'' The giant hearts are steamed in ovens, to soften the spiky leaves and release the aquameil, which is fermented in wooden vats and then distilled.

As with any product of human ingenuity, tequila comes in many quality levels.

The basic beverage need contain only 51 percent juice from the heart of the blue agave plant; the other 49 percent can be various grains or whatever the manufacturer wants to put in there that will produce sugar for fermentation. Many premium tequilas now carry the designation ``100 Percent Blue Agave,'' which doesn't mean that the stuff is great, just that it's authentic.

Official grading of tequila is rather loose. White or silver tequila is usually the cheapest, generally unaged, bottled immediately after distillation; it has the advantage of retaining the distinctive resinous-cheesy fruitiness of the agave. Reposado or ``rested'' tequilas have spent two to six months in oak casks. Gold tequilas, though mellow in color, may not necessarily have been aged in wood since Mexican law allows producers to add caramel or other coloring agents to the beverage; their quality may not be better than white tequilas, nor is ``gold'' an official designation.

Tequilas aged in oak casks from one to three years are designated anejo on their labels. These prestige products may offer surprising richness, complexity and intensity and can be enjoyed chilled and sipped as one does cognac or single-malt scotch. Ultra-premium tequilas are often referred to as ``gold'' because of their softly glowing golden color, but the term is a misnomer. In addition to the word anejo on the label, consumers should look for a registration number called the Norma Oficial Mexicana de Calidad (NOM) as a mark of authenticity and quality control.

Tequila is associated primarily with two drinks, the margarita and the Tequila Sunrise, at least for those who don't want to knock it back in the traditional manner: lick salt from between the thumb and first finger, suck a wedge of lemon or lime, down the shot in one go. That form of recreational punishment is obviously not for everyone; as the Southern Beverage Journal notes, 65 percent of all tequila sales involve some form of margarita.

The origins of the margarita, bastion of Mexican restaurants north of the border, are lost in obscurity and legend, but the drink itself is a simple one involving tequila, cointreau or triple sec, and lime juice. The usual practice is to rim the glass with salt. Nowadays, the frozen margarita, perhaps in imitation of the frozen daiquiri, prevails in most Mexican restaurant bars.

Cesar Parra, owner of Salsa, said he has seen a change in the public's attitude toward tequila since the restaurant opened in 1991.

``People have really become a lot more interested in finer-quality tequilas. They're finding that better tequilas are not as hard on the palate or throat. There's a tremendous flavor distinction between the premium products and those that were available before.''

Margaritas outsell other mixed drinks at Salsa three to one. The margaritas are made in 5-gallon batches with the bar's house tequila, Torada, which Parra described as ``not the cheapest but a nice middle-of-the-road tequila.''

More than half the margaritas sold at Salsa are frozen, but for the authentic experience, Parra recommends a personally crafted cocktail made from a top-quality tequila, cointreau and fresh lime juice. ``You really want to be able to taste the tequila,' he said, ``and just accent it with the orange flavor of the cointreau.' Grand marnier is often considered acceptable as a substitute for cointreau, but Parra feels its strong character masks the tequila's essential flavor, as does the rim of salt that people expect on their margarita glasses.

Rarely does a customer at Salsa order a Tequila Sunrise, which Parra characterized as a drink ``popular in the '70s.' But Stemmerik, at Cozymel's, said, ``We sell quite a few Tequila Sunrises. We sell a lot of whatever tequila is in. . . . People seem to know a lot more about tequila now than they used to.''

To reach Fredric Koeppel, call 529-2376 or send E-mail: koeppel@gomemphis.com

CAPTION:
photo-illustration

Photo illustration by Michael McMullan
(Color) A Mexican mirage: Tequila comes from the blue agave plant - more lily than cactus.

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DESCRIPTORS: ALCOHOL; PROFILE

6/9/72 (Item 1 from file: 743)
DIALOG(R)File 743:(New Jersey)The Record
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ELUSIVE TEQUILA COCKTAIL

Record (Northern New Jersey) (RE) - WEDNESDAY, October 17, 2001
By: MIKE DUNNE, special from the Sacramento Bee
Edition: All Editions Section: LIFESTYLE / FOOD Page: F2
Word Count: 756

TEXT:

"Never heard of it."

"Never heard of it."

"Never heard of it."

On this pub crawl, the glass was neither half empty nor half full. It was non-existent. We could have been driving. We ended the night as parched as we'd started.

Up and down the boulevards of Sacramento, Calif., stopping at this tavern and that cafe, we'd been seeking the cocktail called paloma.

In the midst of Hispanic Heritage Month, the search for a paloma seemed

a refreshing way to help determine how far Latino culture has penetrated into dining and drinking habits.

Not far, at least as far as the paloma is concerned. Bartender after bartender had never heard of it. Eventually, they may, if the beverages and foods of Mexico continue to migrate north, and if tequila continues its surging popularity.

We first encountered the paloma in Guadalajara, the capital of the west-central Mexican state of Jalisco, where more than 90 percent of the world's tequila is produced.

There, the only people drinking the most popular tequila-based cocktail in the United States, the margarita, seemed to be fellow gringo tourists. The locals, including several distillers, preferred their tequila straight or in an effervescent, citrusy cocktail called the paloma, invariably served in a tall tumbler, sometimes with salt on the rim, almost always with a straw.

"Paloma" is Spanish for "dove," and a paloma cocktail does have the greenish-gray hue of a mourning dove, thereby possibly accounting for the libation's name. But "paloma" also is the name of a corrosive kind of infestation that attacks the bluish-green, swordlike leaves of the agave plant, the prickly succulent from which tequila is distilled.

Little appears to be known of the paloma in either the United States or Mexico, though recipes abound online. Other than a shot or two of tequila, the paloma almost always includes ice, salt, lime juice and some sort of grapefruit juice - sometimes freshly squeezed, but more often a citric soft drink such as Squirt.

Lance Cutler, author of "The Tequila Lover's Guide to Mexico and Mezcal" (Wine Patrol Press, \$17.95), said paloma is the only tequila-based cocktail he drinks.

"Here's the recipe: Fill a glass with ice, add a shot of any tequila you want, put in a pinch of salt, squeeze a quarter of a lime and toss the wedge into the glass, and fill with Squirt. In Mexico it's also made with Fresca, but it's better with Squirt," said Cutler.

In contrast to the margarita, customarily made with tequila, an orange-flavored liqueur such as Cointreau, sweetened lime juice, and sweet-and-sour mix, the paloma is a model of simplicity and lightness.

Many agree that the paloma's directness offers one distinct advantage over the margarita: In a paloma, the flavor of the tequila is much more pronounced. "The sugar and citric acids in a margarita overwhelm the tequila," said Gutierrez. "With the paloma you can taste the tequila better."

Not long ago, it didn't much matter whether the tequila could be tasted. Then, tequila tended to be a cheap and coarse spirit, without complexity or refinement. Nowadays, however, more tequilas are being produced with the kind of pride, discipline, marketing acumen - and prices - that long have distinguished more highly regarded spirits.

The popularity of tequila in the United States is fueled largely by the popularity of the margarita, but the rising cachet of tequila, encouraged by Mexican regulations governing everything from distilling methods to label definitions, also is playing a pivotal role in encouraging consumers to take another look at the spirit.

In this country, tequila accounts for 4.9 percent of the spirits market, but over the past decade no spirit has grown faster in sales, reports Judy Blatman, spokeswoman for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

Between 1990 and 2000, tequila sales in the United States leaped 66 percent, compared with a 26.1 percent increase for rum and a 2 percent gain for vodka, two other "hot" spirits in recent years.

Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and California lead in annual per-capita consumption of tequila.

In cooking, a splash of the Mexican spirit can add a smoky, earthy flavor.

When President Bush played host to Mexican President Vicente Fox in his first state dinner at the White House recently, the menu bore several creative Nuevo Latino touches, including pepita-crusted bison with an apple-chipotle sauce, and raspberries and peaches with a tequila sabayon.

This could be just the exposure tequila needs to break into the culinary big time.

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